

## *The Power of Intention*

*April 9, 2011*

After an active day like today, you may have to do some active sweeping out of the mind before it's ready to settle down. Just remind yourself with regard to whatever you did this morning, whatever you did this afternoon: Sweep it out, sweep it out, sweep it out. It's not a concern right now. What you're planning to do tomorrow, sweep it out. You've got the present moment. Try to make the most of it.

You have no other responsibilities, no other things you have to do or think about right now. This is one of the big ironies of human life. We all want free time, but when we get free time, we don't know what to do with it. We're at loose ends. We fill it up with Styrofoam peanuts and wood shavings. So sweep them out. If you find the mind wandering back to those things in the course of the hour, just cut it off, cut it off. As one of the ajaans in Thailand says, think of your mind having a knife. Any thought that comes up, just cut right through it and come back to the breath.

Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths and notice where you feel that sensation of breathing in the body. You may feel the air coming in through the nose, but you can also feel the rise and fall of the chest, the rise and fall of the shoulders, the energy flow in different parts of the body. Focus on whichever sensation seems most comfortable and allow it to have some freedom. In other words, don't clamp down on it. Give it some space so that it can feel free and open. Then notice what kind of rhythm the breath develops as you allow it to be comfortable, as you give it space.

Wherever you feel that sense of ease, think of the ease spreading out from that spot—again to prevent that sense of clamping down on the breath. We do have this habit that when we tell ourselves we're going to focus on something, we tighten it up. We squeeze it to keep it pinned down. But you can't pin down the breath. The more you try to pin it down, the more you're going to mess up the energy in the body.

So allow the breath to have its freedom. You want to make your gaze as continuous as possible, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-. Make that your game for the evening: How continuously can you keep your gaze on the breath? If you find it slipping off, just come right back. Don't get upset. Don't get discouraged. Just keep coming back, coming back, coming back. This way, you give the mind something good to do with its free time. You're

developing good qualities: your persistence and your mindfulness. And when you really are ardent at this, the mind will settle down. When the mind settles down, it's got a home. It's got a good safe place to stay.

So look carefully at what you're doing. Try to monitor the mind. It's almost as if one mind is watching the breath, and another mind is watching the mind itself. This is the quality of alertness. Although your prime focus should be on the breath, still you have to keep tabs on the mind as well, to gain a sense of when it's beginning to wander off and stray into thoughts of what happened today or what's going to happen tomorrow. You just say, "No. Right here, right here, right here. All the important things you need to know are right here." So look carefully right here, but allow "right here" to have a sense of freedom.

This is the balancing act we do as we meditate. On the one hand, you want to keep the mind right here. On the other hand, you don't want it to have a sense of being imprisoned here. One of the best ways of doing that is to get it really interested in what's going on here. Think about the activities you do where you really get absorbed. It's not because you're forcing yourself to be with that activity—like drawing or any of the arts or any craft—that has you absorbed, that has you interested. It's because you're interested in it that you get absorbed.

As mastery develops, there's also a sense of fluidity. You think of doing something, and you find it very easy to do. That gets you even more absorbed. There's no sense of awkwardness. Now, getting there takes time.

And it's the same here: In the beginning, working with the meditation, you may find a certain awkwardness. The mind doesn't seem to be settling down quite the way you'd like it to. There's something in the way. But if you take an interest in the process, that quality of interest can overcome a lot of the awkwardness as you begin to see what connects, what keeps the mind here, what pulls it away, what can bring it back.

As for anything else that might be nibbling away at the edges of your awareness, just let it go, let it go, let it go. You've got something right here that you can really focus on, really learn from—because everything you experience in the present moment has an element of intention. There's an intention here that focuses you on one thing rather than another. There's an intention in the way you pay attention to certain feelings and not other feelings, certain perceptions and not other perceptions, certain thoughts, certain sensations in the body. That element of intention is the really important thing we're after here: seeing how we shape our experience out of the potentials that are here.

There are potentials for pain in the body; there are potentials for pleasure. There are potentials for irritation; there are potentials for ease. What you want to

learn is how to focus on the helpful potentials. As you do that, you learn an awful lot about this process of intention. You gain a sense of the power you have when you're choosing to focus on something and, from that skillful focus, you can fabricate things skillfully and create a sense of ease even in the midst of a lot of pain. This is an important skill to develop.

You might scan through the body to see where there's some tension that you're holding on to. Then very consciously breathe in and relax that tension, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out—and then through the next and the next and the next. Get good at that. Then you realize you've got a skill that you can apply to other patterns of tension in the body, the way you tend to tense up around pain. This gives you a more solid foundation where you can become more interested in trying to understand the process of pain itself to see to what extent you're actually making the pain worse by the way you think about it, the way you perceive it.

When you can see how your intentions in the present moment have a big impact on your experience, that gives you a lot to explore. You begin to see the relevance of this meditation because it keeps reminding you: You do have the ability to choose what you're going to focus on and, when you've focused on it, what you're going to do with it. You could sit here and spend the whole hour making yourself miserable, or you could focus on sensations of ease, sensations of fullness that go with the breath, allowing them to spread through the body and create a very strong sense of well-being right here.

You've got an important skill that you can take into other aspects of your life. Other times when there's pain, other times when there's weakness, when there's illness, you're not totally a victim of things. You have a handle on how you can look at things, understand them, and work with them so that you can create a sense of well-being even in the midst of a lot of pain and a lot of disappointment, a lot of difficulty. As the Buddha points out, the extent to which the mind is suffering has very little to do with things outside and very much to do with how the mind is processing things outside. It is possible to live in difficult situations and not suffer.

So the basis of that skill—learning how to stay in the present moment and look at what the mind is doing and how it handles the potentials that are right here so that you can make the most of them—creates a sense of ease and well-being, a sense of feeling at home here. You can fully inhabit right here and not get pushed out by pains and not get pushed out by unpleasant emotions. You were here first. Keep reminding yourself of that. That's an important perception to hold in mind.

It's the same as the body. Pains come and go, but the body was here first. The breath was there first. Your awareness was here before any of them. All too often when a pain comes up, we tend to tense up around it and create a blockage in the way the blood flows. That then holds a perception there: that nothing can get through the blockage. The breath can't get through it, and the breath gets confined to a narrow space. But remind yourself that the breath was there first. The flow of the blood was there first. The pain came later. Then you find it easier for your conscious awareness to spread there and for the flow of energy to spread there. It's your space. It's not the pain's space. The pain came later. Don't let it hem you in.

Learn how to use this perception with other things that seem to be holding you in, confining you, as well. The perception of confinement: That's what is actually holding you in. When you can drop that perception, you have a lot more freedom. You have a foundation from which you can deal with these things so that they're not overwhelming. You're larger than they are. Your awareness is deeper, larger—totally unlimited. When you learn how to perceive the problems of the world as small, and your awareness as a lot larger, you're in a much better position. Working with the breath is a way of putting you in that position, so take some interest in what's going on, how you perceive the situation in the present moment, and how those perceptions may be contributing to the suffering that's really not necessary.

A lot of important things are going on right here, right now. What you're doing right now is the main factor in determining whether you're going to suffer from the situation or not. There's that line in *Paradise Lost* where Satan says the mind can make a heaven of hell, or a hell of heaven. Of course, he's in hell at the time, and he's trying to think he can make a heaven out of it. It sounds very noble. But you have to remember he also made a hell out of heaven—that's why he couldn't stay there.

All too often, the mind is like that. Things are not all that bad, but we make them a lot worse than they have to be. Learn how to turn that power around. Maybe when things are bad, you can make them not so bad. At the very least, you can learn how not to suffer from them. That's an important skill, probably the most important skill you could ever develop.

So take some interest in what's happening right here, right now. As for what happened today or what's going to happen tomorrow, just let it drop away, drop away, drop away. At the moment, the past is just a series of perceptions, just some memories. Tomorrow is just a series of perceptions, anticipations. They don't have

the actual reality that your breath has right now. The breath is right here, so take some interest in how the mind relates to the breath right here.

Then learn how to see what you can learn about the mind as you try to keep it anchored here. The more you understand your own mind, the more you're able to understand its powers and how to use those powers wisely.